



USDA Foreign Agricultural Service

GAIN Report

Global Agriculture Information Network

Template Version 2.09

Voluntary Report - public distribution

Date: 4/18/2005

GAIN Report Number: FR5030

France

Biotechnology

Primary Conclusions of French Parliamentary Working Group on Biotech

2005

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Report Highlights:

The French Parliamentary working group on biotechnology just released its final report. Most disappointingly, the report recommends a "pause" in biotech programs for 2005, meaning no new product testing or open-field experimentation until Spring 2006. Reactions to this announcements ranged from confusion by biotech companies which have already sown test plots to threats from activists to destroy 2005 test plots planted despite the recommended pause. The French national biotech legislation expected to follow the recommendations of the report is now not expected to be presented to the French Parliament before June or even October 2005. This makes the near future of French biotech legislation unclear and subject to various interpretations for the rest of 2005.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Unscheduled Report
Paris [FR1]
[FR]

On April 14, at a press conference organized at the French National Assembly, the Parliamentary working group on biotechnology released its final report, after several months of work on the issue (see Paris report FR5023 dated March 13, 2005 for more information on this group).

Pauses, Delays and Threats

Most surprisingly and most disappointingly, the working group recommends a **“pause”** in biotech programs for 2005. If this recommendation is acted on, it would mean no new product testing or open-field experimentation until Spring 2006. Presumably, experimentation with currently approved EU/French biotech varieties would be allowed. Some open-field test plots have already sown at this point, farm groups are already calling for clarification of this recommendation.

The working group spokesman estimated that the comprehensive French biotech law, which is expected to closely follow the recommendations of the working group, would be **delayed** and not be presented to the French Parliament until June or even October 2005. This would mean further delays in France's transposition of EU Directive 2001/18 into national legislation, and in France's national legislation for biotech cultivation and coexistence.

Finally, celebrity activist José Bové, who had set quietly through most of the press conference, suddenly rose from his chair and **threatened** that if the “pause” recommended by the working group was not respected by the French authorities and biotech companies open field test plots would be carried out on June 18. Mr. Bové then left the press conference in dramatic fashion with all but a hand full of the covering press left behind to cover the rest of the working group's presentation.

Summary of the working group findings/recommendations:

- **On health:** as expected, the report concludes there is no additional health risk from GM-derived products compared to conventional products, and there are potential health benefits from some biotech products;
- **On the environment:** the report is less sure of the environmental benefits/risks of biotechnology. The report cited reduced pesticide use as a benefit but was unable to conclude whether of biotechnology will have a positive or negative impact on biodiversity.

However, a large majority of working group members supported open-field testing. The report endorses using the EU's current 0.9 percent threshold for the adventitious presence of biotech, even in organic products. (This was a big disappointment for organic industry representatives at the press conference.)

The report recommends that biotech crops be planted along with buffer zones planted in conventional varieties.

- **On legal issues:** the report recommends that biotech growers take responsibility for cross contamination based on adventitious presence thresholds, but also proposes creating a backup compensation fund (funded by the government and the biotech industry) for extreme cases of adventitious presence.

As expected, the report recommends also calls for changes to the French evaluation process for new biotech products. It recommends that two committees be charged with biotech evaluation. The first committee to be made up of

scientists from several fields beyond the molecular biologists that currently review biotech applications and the second one made up of representatives from civil society (such as NGOs, ecologists, and farmers). One President would preside over both committees. Surprisingly, the working group recommends this new structure fall under the Ministry of Research, and not the MinAg or Ministry of Ecology as is currently the case.

- **On economic issues:** the report proposes increasing the budget for research in plant biology, toxicology, epidemiology, and entomology. The report proposes using the European system of plant variety protection (Certificat d'Obtention Végétale) as opposed to the patent system for biotech products before international organizations such as the WTO and CODEX.
- **Information:** Finally, the report recommends creating an independent authority in charge of informing the public and regional governments of any biotech field tests.